

# Aborted Vacation

## Muhammad is caught with a suitcase of cash

*By Steven Frank and Steven K.C. Poh / Kuala Lumpur*

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**T**HE GOOD TIMES ENDED abruptly for Muhammad Taib. The chief minister of the rich Malaysian state of Selangor was in the midst of a family vacation Dec. 22 when customs officials at Brisbane airport found close to \$1 million in his suitcase. That's against the law in Australia since Muhammad apparently did not declare he had more than A\$5,000 (\$4,000) cash in his possession. But the legal significance of the incident paled in comparison with the moral implications for the prominent politician. As the longtime chief of Selangor, Muhammad, 51, earns an estimated \$8,000 a month, excluding perks, and is supposed to stay out of private business. Where then did the money come from? And why was he carrying it in cash?

The chief minister had an explanation. After returning to Malaysia last week, Muhammad said the money was given to him by his brothers for an Australian property transaction that was not completed. "I didn't realize that I had to make a declaration for the cash before leaving Australia," he said. True or not, many felt the damage had already been done. "The incident has been a disgrace to the country," says Lim Guan Eng, deputy leader of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP). "For a senior politician to be arrested in a foreign country does not say good things about the level of corruption control in Malaysia."

What exactly it does say about corruption may not be known for some time, if ever. But it certainly doesn't look good. Just three months ago, Muhammad was one of three members of the dominant United Malays National Organization picked as party vice-president. The polls followed an emotive speech by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who heads UMNO, about the evils of money politics. Mahathir even wept, saying that if left unchecked, this "cancer" will eat into the very fabric of Malaysian society. Politicians, Mahathir added, must not only be clean, but must also be seen to be clean.

How clean is Muhammad? The one-time school teacher has certainly attracted foreign investment to the state, streamlined its bureaucracy and modernized its infrastructure. He has also made some controversial decisions. Last year, for instance, he infuriated many women by dropping a requirement that a man needs to get his wife's permission before entering a subsequent marriage. There have been some questionable dealings in his past too. In early 1992, Muhammad had to deflect claims that he accepted \$4 million from a property developer.

Now Muhammad faces his toughest challenge. There have already been conflicting explanations as to why he was carrying so much cash. A few days after the arrest, Selangor UMNO deputy liaison chairman Abu Hassan Omar said Muhammad had told him on the phone that "the money was for shopping." Soon after that, a spokesman from the chief minister's own office maintained that nothing of that nature was implied in the telephone conversation, and that Muhammad did not say the money belonged to him.

Muhammad will have to appear in an Australian court March 21. He is to face charges that could lead to forfeiture of the money, a fine and up to five years in jail. Until then, it appears he will keep his posts as Selangor chief and UMNO vice president. Just how Mahathir handles this case will be the key. Muhammad has already submitted a report on his arrest to the prime minister. Others would like to see much more. "There's definitely a need for Muhammad to show some public

accountability by declaring his assets," says DAP leader Lim Kit Siang. "Otherwise, the PM's tears would have been in vain."